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**ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE PUBLIC HEARING
January 31, 2011**

**TESTIMONY OF
SANDY BRESLIN, DIRECTOR OF GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS
AUDUBON CONNECTICUT**

**IN SUPPORT OF: S.B. No. 829 AN ACT ESTABLISHING AN OPEN SPACE
REGISTRY**

Senator Meyer, Representative Roy and members of the Environment Committee, on behalf of Audubon Connecticut, the state organization of the National Audubon Society, I want to thank you for raising S.B. 829 AA Establishing an Open Space Registry and giving us the opportunity to express our **strong support** for this legislation, which provides a first step toward enhancing and improving our understanding of protected open space and farmland in our state.

Accurate data regarding protected open space and farmland are essential to charting our progress toward meeting our state's open space and farmland protection goals. Accurate data are also essential to planning, prioritizing and analyzing acquisitions, conservation and management actions, and their impacts on target habitats or species.

At present, the state possesses good records regarding land protected with state funding, for example through the Department of Environmental Protection's (DEP) Open Space and Watershed Municipal Matching Grants program, the Recreation and Natural Heritage Trust Fund and the Department of Agriculture's (DoAg) Purchase of Development Rights program. This information can be accessed and viewed via the web site that DEP hosts jointly with the University of Connecticut's Center for Land Use Education and Research (CLEAR) known as: CT Environmental Conditions Online or CT ECO: www.cteco.uconn.edu.

Unfortunately, much less is known about lands protected by municipalities. The process of gathering this information is time consuming and expensive, requiring multiple visits to municipal town halls by specially trained staff. Without this information, however, our understanding of protected natural land and farms is incomplete. In testimony before this Committee last year, the Working Lands Alliance estimated that up to 10,000 acres of locally protected farmland may currently be uncouned in our state farmland inventory.

Recognizing the need for a more complete data set, DEP has for some years been working to develop a town-by-town **inventory** of protected open space lands through the **Protected Open Space Mapping** project or **POSM**. According to DEP, POSM is currently 66% complete and last year DEP Commissioner Marella estimated that it would require \$500,000 over two years to complete the project. We are all fully aware that such funding is unlikely to be available during this fiscal year.

So, POSM is playing opossum. The project is at a standstill and not going anywhere in the foreseeable future.

POSM is also stuck looking backwards to what has been, unable to automatically incorporate new information. By this I mean that the inventory is static, providing an accurate snapshot of conditions up to the moment that the DEP staff person leaves Town Hall. At that moment, the inventory immediately becomes outdated. When a new property is protected, POSM has does not know about it. The only mechanism for updating the inventory is to once again send staff out to every Town Hall in the state to gather information. POSM is only accurate up to the time when the data was collected, and for some towns, that could be as many as 10 years ago. The CT ECO web site says of POSM:

Use Limitations

This is the best digital information available statewide that defines and maps protected open space, but it is not necessarily current and complete in every town collected. Also, it does not include protected open space information collected during the first phase of the POSM project for the towns along the Connecticut coastline due to issues related to data quality and completeness. Data quality and completeness improved during the second phase of the POSM project. The POSM data is not meant to be used for legal boundary purposes. Research and data collection dates vary for each town. For more information regarding individual town data research and collection dates, contact the Department of Environmental Protection at 860-424-3016. Due to the reliance on a combination of digital parcel data and course and distance measurements from A-2 certified boundary survey maps to define parcel boundaries, the map accuracy exceeds that of 1:24,000 scale (1 inch = 2,000 feet) mapping, but it is not known by how much.

To address this need for an accurate inventory of protected open space, **S.B. 829 proposes the creation of a protected open space registry**. Due to staff and budget limitations, S.B. 829 envisions an online “repository” where information would be voluntarily submitted and held until resources become available to incorporate it into the existing online programs such as CT ECO.

Unlike POSM, the information in the registry would be:

- **Dynamic** – able to incorporate updated information on an ongoing basis
- **Voluntary** – rather than paying to send staff to 169 Town Halls, municipalities would be asked to voluntarily submit new information about lands in their communities protected through easement or acquisition

- Affordable – at this time only a repository for the information, i.e. an online portal where municipalities can voluntarily submit information is envisioned to be developed within existing DEP, CLEAR and/or Department of Agriculture resources. The information can be collected and held until such time as resources are available to integrate it into a more developed format such as the existing GIS layers available at CT ECO.

Audubon Connecticut *strongly encourages* the Environment Committee to support this common-sense and cost effective legislation.

Thank you for your attention to this issue.

Audubon Connecticut, the state organization of the National Audubon Society with more than 10,000 members statewide, works to protect birds, other wildlife and their habitats through education, science and conservation, and legislative advocacy for the benefit of people and the earth's biological diversity. Through our network of nature education centers, protected wildlife sanctuaries, and local, volunteer Chapters, we seek to connect people with nature and inspire the next generation of conservationists.

